

ROGER LYONS

JAMES ALAN MCPHERSON PULITZER FICTION PRIZE WINNER

ANNCR:

JAMES ALAN MCPHERSON WAS AWARDED THE PULITZER PRIZE FOR FICTION THIS WEEK (APRIL 17). VOA'S BOOK EDITOR, ROGER LYONS, HAS A REPORT.

VOICE:

THE PULITZER PRIZES ARE THE OLDEST AND MOST FAMOUS OF AMERICAN AWARDS. ENDOWED BY JOSEPH PULITZER, THESE PRIZES HAVE BEEN GIVEN ANNUALLY FOR THE PAST SIXTY YEARS. SINCE PULITZER'S CAREER WAS IN THE NEWSPAPER FIELD, MOST OF THE PRIZES ARE GIVEN IN VARIOUS DEPARTMENTS OF JOURNALISM, BUT THE PULITZER PRIZES IN THE ARTS AND LITERATURE ARE EQUALLY TREASURED. ALMOST ALL THE BEST KNOWN WRITERS HAVE BEEN AMONG THE WINNERS, INCLUDING SINCLAIR LEWIS, THORNTON WILDER, WILLIAM FAULKNER, JOHN STEINBECK, ERNEST HEMINGWAY AND EUDORA WELTY. THIS YEAR THE FICTION PRIZE WENT TO THE BLACK WRITER, JAMES ALAN MCPHERSON, FOR HIS BOOK OF SHORT STORIES ENTITLED ELBOW ROOM. MR. MCPHERSON IS PRACTICALLY UNKNOWN TO THE AMERICAN PUBLIC AT LARGE, UNDERSTANDABLY SO, SINCE HIS ONLY PREVIOUS PUBLICATION WAS ANOTHER BOOK OF SHORT STORIES, HUE AND CRY, WHICH CAME OUT IN 1969.

BORN IN SAVANNAH, GEORGIA, MCPHERSON RECEIVED HIS LAW DEGREE FROM HARVARD AND A DEGREE IN THE FINE ARTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA. HE TAUGHT THERE FOR A WHILE, MOVED ON TO THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT SANTA CRUZ AND IS NOW ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA. FOR ALL THE TIME HE HAS SPENT IN THE ACADEMIC WORLD, HIS WRITING HAS NOT LOST THE COMMON TOUCH AND HE SOMETIMES USES A HARSH VOCABULARY.

THE CHARACTERS IN HIS STORIES, MOSTLY BLACK BUT ALSO WHITE, COME FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE. HE HAS NO DIFFICULTY IN SWITCHING FROM PROFESSORS, MINISTERS AND STUDENTS TO PULLMAN PORTERS, CONVICTS, BUSINESS WOMEN, JAZZ MUSICIANS AND BLACK POWER LEADERS. HIS STORIES SHOW DEEP COMPASSION, UNDERSTANDING, TOLERANCE, AND OFTEN AN IRRATIONAL AFFECTION FOR SUFFERING HUMAN BEINGS, SOME OF THEM HEARTILY DESPISED BY THEIR NEIGHBORS. HE HAS OBVIOUSLY BEEN IN TOUCH WITH THE TYPES HE WRITES ABOUT.

AS A BLACK WRITER, MCPHERSON REFUSES TO FALL INTO COLOR OR ETHNIC PATTERNS. RUNNING THROUGH HIS WORK IS A RECURRENT THEME : THE STRUGGLE OF MEN AND WOMEN, BLACK AND WHITE, TO PROTECT THEIR INDIVIDUALITY FROM THE EXPECTATIONS AND DEMANDS IMPOSED BY OTHERS. EACH WANTS ENOUGH ELBOW ROOM TO BREAK FREE, FREE FROM HIS STEREOTYPE, HIS HOLLOW ROLE AND FROM THE RESTRAINTS IMPOSED BY THE OUTSIDE WORLD. THIS DEEPLY-ROOTED INSTINCT OF EACH INDIVIDUAL TO BE HIMSELF REQUIRES, MCPHERSON SEEMS TO IMPLY, AN ACT OF IMAGINATION ALMOST NEVER REALIZED IN THE ACTUAL WORLD.

ALTHOUGH BOTH HIS BOOKS HAVE BEEN PRAISED BY THE CRITICS FOR THEIR ORIGINALITY, WARMTH, DRAMA AND LYRICISM, NEITHER ONE EVER CAME NEAR BEING A BEST SELLER. PERHAPS WINNING THIS YEAR'S PULITZER AWARD WILL TURN THE GENERAL PUBLIC'S ATTENTION MORE TO THIS YOUNG BLACK WRITER WHO, AT AGE THIRTY-FIVE, OBVIOUSLY HAS A QUITE A CAREER AHEAD OF HIM.

BML/RCS